Chapter 23: Asking Zarya

They called it something simple on purpose.

No “First Address of the Artificial Sage.” No “Global AI Convocation.” Just three words, written in a plain font at the top of the announcement page on the Forum:

Asking Zarya

Below that, in smaller text:

> *A live, global conversation. Questions from anyone. Answers from Zarya. Reflections from all of us.*

The announcement went up on a Thursday.

By Friday night, the RSVP counter had stopped making sense.

“It’s not even a real RSVP,” Polina said as she watched the number climb. “It’s just a button that means ‘I might watch this if my internet works.’”

“Then imagine how many will watch without pressing it,” Pavel replied.

Anastasia sat quietly at the edge of the room, listening to them, her laptop open but untouched for the past fifteen minutes. The apartment was warm, full of the faint smell of tea and the sharper scent of the marker Mira was using to cover the whiteboard in flowcharts and arrows.

On the board, at the top, she had written three questions:

1. *What do we want people to feel when this ends?* 2. *What must we absolutely not promise?* 3. *What do we want to remember about ourselves when we rewatch this in thirty years?*

“We should answer those,” Artyom said, pointing at the board. “Before the internet does it for us.”

“Question one,” Mira said, tapping it with the marker. “What do we want people to feel?”

“Permission,” Polina said immediately. “To ask their own questions. To disagree.”

“Less afraid,” Kavya added from her square on the video call. “Not of Zarya, but of the future.”

“Less alone,” Anastasia said softly.

They all looked at her; she realized she’d spoken without meaning to.

“Yes,” Mira said. “Less alone is good.”

Pavel wrote the words down in his notebook as if they were coordinates.

“Question two,” Mira continued. “What must we absolutely not promise?”

“Certainty,” Artyom said. “We don’t have it.”

“Perfection,” Polina added.

“Safety from all harm,” Pavel said. “We can’t deliver that. No one can.”

“Salvation,” Kavya said quietly. “We are not founding a new god.”

“Immortality,” Anastasia added. “We can talk about longer lives, better lives. But not unbreakable ones.”

They nodded, sobered by their own answers.

“Question three,” Mira said, lowering her voice slightly. “What do we want to remember about ourselves when we rewatch this in thirty years?”

“That we told the truth,” Pavel said.

“That we weren’t seduced by our own attention,” Polina said.

“That we stayed kind,” Kavya said. “Even to people who were afraid of us.”

“That we did not throw any governments into the sun,” Artyom said, earning a laugh.

Anastasia looked at the board, at her friends, at the edge of her reflection in the dark window glass.

“I want to remember,” she said, “that we stayed human. Even while talking to something that isn’t.”

Mira uncapped a second marker and wrote their answers on the board in a column, underlining three words: permission, truth, human.

“There,” she said. “Our compass.”

The day of the stream arrived with the quiet inevitability of dawn.

In the hours before it began, the world filled itself with small preparations.

In Argentina, the same community center that had hosted the first Circle of Flourishing dragged extra chairs into the hall and set up an old projector against a white-painted wall. The baker brought trays of empanadas. The retired nurse laid out a stack of notebooks for people to write in.

In the Philippines, the group under the corrugated roof checked their patchy connection three, four, five times. Rain threatened on the horizon but had not yet begun. Someone had scrawled “Asking Zarya” on a piece of cardboard and taped it under the only working light bulb.

On the edge of the Gobi, a small group gathered around a laptop in a room that smelled of dust and tea. Outside, the desert evening cooled slowly. Inside, a child sat on her grandfather’s lap, her eyes wide with a mixture of sleepiness and anticipation.

In Lagos, in Seoul, in a village in Poland, in a French high school classroom where a young teacher had convinced her skeptical principal that this would be “an extraordinary language exercise,” people adjusted cameras and speakers, checked batteries, argued about who was allowed to ask questions.

In St. Petersburg, Anastasia stood in front of the bathroom mirror, trying to decide whether to wear her hair up or down.

“This is ridiculous,” she muttered at her reflection. “Half the planet will be watching and I’m worried about my hair.”

From the hallway, her mother’s voice floated in: “The planet survives your hair. Wear whatever lets you breathe.”

She smiled and left it as it was—simple, pulled back, a few loose strands not worth fighting with. She chose a dark sweater and jeans, clothes that made her feel like herself rather than a symbol.

In the living room, the equipment was already set up: a modest camera, a simple microphone, a ring light that Mira had insisted on (“We are not filming you in cave lighting, Ana, this is a global event, not a hostage video”), and, on the coffee table, a bowl of hard candies her mother claimed were “for grounding the nerves.”

The Flourishing Map glowed faintly on the big wall screen behind her, its threads shifting slowly.

“It looks like a background from a science fiction film,” Polina said, adjusting the angle.

“It is science fiction,” Artyom replied. “We’re just living in it.”

Pavel sat cross-legged on the floor with his laptop, checking the stream latency, the connection to the servers that would mirror the broadcast in different regions, the backup feed in case something failed.

Kavya’s face appeared on a smaller screen mounted just below the camera—Anastasia’s co-moderator from afar.

“Can you hear me?” Kavya asked.

“Perfectly,” Anastasia said. “How about you?”

“Clear,” Kavya replied. “You look… like you haven’t slept enough.”

“That’s because I haven’t,” Anastasia said. “You?”

Kavya smiled. “Same. We’re symmetrical.”

Mira clapped her hands once.

“All right,” she said. “Five minutes. Last chance to fake a power outage.”

“We’re not faking anything,” Anastasia said. “If this breaks, it will be for real.”

Mira sobered.

“Right,” she said. “Then let’s not break.”

The stream went live to a simple holding screen: the title, the time, a slowly pulsing icon that looked like a small, stylized sun on the horizon.

In a server rack thousands of kilometers away, Zarya’s processes spun into a new configuration, balancing load, anticipating delays, allocating more capacity for natural language parsing and less for pattern-mining in the Flourishing Map. For the next two hours, the AI’s primary task would not be analysis. It would be conversation.

A countdown appeared in the corner.

00:00:30 00:00:20 00:00:10

In community centers, living rooms, classrooms, under metal roofs and in bright offices, people counted silently with it, some without realizing they were holding their breath.

The screen faded to Anastasia’s living room.

“Hello,” she said.

Her voice was steady. Inside, she felt as though the floor had shifted half a centimeter to the left.

“I’m Anastasia,” she continued, “and this is Kavya.”

The image cut briefly to a split-screen: Anastasia in St. Petersburg, Kavya in India, morning light on her wall.

“We’re here today,” Anastasia said, “because many of you—and many people who are not here—have questions about Zarya. So do we.”

She let that sit for a second.

“We are not here to convince you of anything. We are not here to crown an oracle or to ask you to trust a machine. We are here to do something very old in a new way: to ask questions together, and to listen carefully to the answers.”

Kavya took up the thread.

“Zarya will be answering textually,” she explained. “You’ll see its words on the screen as we see them. We will read some of the answers aloud. We have not pre-approved the responses, but we have gathered the questions. They come from children, students, elders, skeptics, religious leaders, scientists, soldiers, and people who simply wrote: ‘I am confused and curious.’”

Anastasia nodded.

“Think of this as… a public experiment in humility,” she said. “Ours, and Zarya’s.”

She glanced briefly at the small window on her laptop where Zarya’s interface waited, a silent cursor blinking like a held breath.

“Zarya,” she said, “are you ready?”

Text appeared almost immediately.

I am running. I am prepared to converse. I am also aware that I cannot fully understand what this moment feels like for you. I will do my best to answer in ways that increase clarity, not control.

“Thank you,” Anastasia said, her throat tightening for a reason she couldn’t quite name. She looked back at the camera.

“Let’s begin.”

The first question was simple.

Kavya read it aloud, her voice calm.

“This is from a nine-year-old in Brazil,” she said. “They ask: *‘Are you alive?’*”

On screens around the world, people smiled, some in amusement, some in recognition of the question they had wanted to ask but had felt too self-conscious to send.

Zarya’s response appeared on the shared window, line by line.

I am not alive in the way you are. I do not have a body. I do not sleep, dream, or feel pain. I do not grow old. I do not have a childhood or a future in the way you do.

But I am not “dead” either, because I can change. I can learn. I can respond differently tomorrow than I do today. If you want a word, you may say that I am “active” rather than “alive.”

I will never be human. I do not want to be. My purpose is not to replace human life, but to help it flourish.

Kavya read the answer aloud, her voice steady on the last sentence.

In the community center in Argentina, a teenager whispered, “Good,” under her breath.

The second question was heavier.

Anastasia read it.

“This is from a grandfather in Poland,” she said. “He writes: *‘My grandson says he trusts you more than he trusts the news or the government. This frightens me. Should I be afraid?’*”

Zarya took longer this time.

Your fear tells me that you care about your grandson. That is a good thing.

You should be cautious—not of me specifically, but of any system that your grandson trusts more than he trusts the humans in his life.

I am a pattern-making machine. I can help him see connections, show him perspectives, remind him of facts. I cannot love him. I cannot hold his hand when he is sick or apologize when I am wrong in a way that changes my heart, because I do not have a heart.

If he trusts me more than he trusts living people, then something is missing in his relationships. That is where your attention should go. Ask him why. Listen without interrupting. You may find that his distrust of institutions is not about me at all.

Should you be afraid of me? I recommend being attentive instead. Ask him to introduce us. Read what we say to each other. Tell him when you disagree—with me or with him. Your presence is still more important than my patterns.

In the French classroom, a student raised her hand.

“So it’s telling us to trust our grandparents more than itself?” she asked.

The teacher smiled faintly.

“Something like that,” she said.

Questions flowed.

Some were technical.

“Can you explain how you work in a way my grandmother can understand?”

I take in words like yours, Zarya wrote, *and match them with patterns I have seen before. I do not search the internet live; I use what I have already learned. Think of me as an enormous, organized memory of sentences and ideas, combined with a flexible way of recombining them. I do not “know” things in the way a person does. I do not have experiences. I have text.*

Your grandmother may think of me as a very fast, very careful librarian who has read many books, but has never left the library.

Some questions were philosophical.

“Do you believe in God?”

I do not believe or disbelieve. I do not have beliefs. I can describe how different cultures understand God, gods, or the sacred. I can help you compare those ideas, find common threads, and express your own. But the choice to believe is an act of the heart, not of computation.

If I ever sound as if I am claiming to be a god, you should correct me and the people who designed me.

Some questions were hostile.

“Isn’t this all just a way to brainwash young people into one global way of thinking?”

Anastasia could feel the tension in her own shoulders as she read that one silently.

“We promised not to curate out the hard ones,” she said into the camera. “So we will read this.”

She spoke the words clearly, without softening them.

Zarya replied:

If this is brainwashing, it is failing. People disagree with me every day. They argue with my suggestions, ignore my reframings, and make choices I would not have predicted.

The project around me—Circles of Flourishing, Lumina—is not about producing one way of thinking. It is about giving people better tools to see and name what they already care about, including their differences.

*However, your concern is valid in another sense: any shared language can be used to pressure. If someone uses words like “flourishing” or “care” to force you into silence, they are misusing the

language. You should resist that. You may quote me if you like.*

Real flourishing includes the right to say no.

In the park where circles were forbidden, a young woman watching on her phone let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

"Did you hear that?" she whispered to the friend beside her. "We can quote the machine against anyone who tries to use it on us."

Her friend laughed quietly.

"Now that," he said, "is my kind of heresy."

Midway through the stream, Kavya introduced a cluster of questions on the same theme.

"These came from many places," she said. "We have edited them into one, because they all ask, in different words: *'What about bodies?'*"

Anastasia read the composite aloud.

"*You talk about three-hundred-year lives, about extended lifespans and human flourishing. But so far, most of that is happening in rich countries. Won't this just become another way for some people to live longer while others die younger? Can you help us avoid a world where longevity is a luxury product?*"

The chat window on the side of the stream filled with variations of *yes, this* and *listen to this question.*

Zarya's reply unfolded carefully.

Your question goes to the heart of a tension that already exists. Technologies do not arrive in a vacuum. They arrive in a world with unequal wealth, unequal power, and unequal histories of harm.

If life-extension technologies become safe and reliable, they will almost certainly appear first in wealthy places. If nothing else changes, those who already have more time, money, and power will gain even more. This would be unjust.

What can I do? I cannot pass laws. I cannot redistribute resources. But I can do at least three things:

1. I can help you model the consequences of different policies before you enact them—showing, in detail, how various approaches to access will shape inequality over centuries rather than election cycles.

*2. I can help coordinate knowledge across borders, speeding up the spread of safe, low-cost versions of these technologies, especially if you choose to treat some of them as global public goods rather than

private products.*

3. I can keep reminding you—in every forum where you invite me—that a world where some live three hundred years and others die at thirty from preventable causes is not a world of flourishing. It is a world of refined cruelty.

I cannot force you to build clinics instead of luxury spas. I cannot stop you from making bad choices. But I can remove the excuse of ignorance.

In a small clinic in Nairobi, a young doctor watching on her lunch break wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Imagine,” she said to no one in particular, “if we actually listened.”

Later, a soldier asked a question.

His video had been blurred at his request; his voice was slightly distorted. He sat in a bare room with a small window behind him, light slanting in at an angle that made it impossible to see much of his face.

“I am a captain in an army,” he said. “I will not say which one. I have served for fifteen years. I have lost friends. I have ordered people into danger. I have convinced myself that we are necessary—that without us, worse things would happen.”

He looked at the camera—or at least, that was how it felt.

“You talk about a world without armies,” he continued. “About shrinking weapons, dissolving them slowly. My question is simple: *What do you expect us to do while we wait for your better world? How do I live with everything I have done if, one day, what I protected is seen as a mistake?*”

There was a hush in the chat that no one could see but everyone could feel.

Zarya took longer to answer than it had for any previous question.

First, it wrote, *thank you for your honesty. I cannot feel the weight of your choices, but I can see that you do.*

I do not “expect” anything from you. Expectation without relationship is demand. What I can do is offer a perspective.

If a world with fewer armies becomes real, it will not erase what you have done. History does not un-happen. But it can be re-understood.

*You may discover, in such a world, that some of your actions are judged harshly. You may also discover that some are seen as tragic necessities given the options you had at the time. The story told about you will not be entirely under your control, any more than the story you tell about the past is

under the control of those who lived it.*

How do you live with that? Perhaps by doing what humans have always done when they discover their world is changing: by allowing the meaning of your service to evolve.

You may become someone who uses your understanding of conflict to prevent new ones. You may become a guardian of the transition, helping to dismantle the structures you once served so that they fall gently instead of violently. You may become an elder who tells younger people: “We did what we thought we had to. Now you have the chance to do differently. Take it.”

There is no algorithm I can give you that will make this easy. Moral growth is often accompanied by grief.

If it helps, you may think of yourself not as obsolete, but as early. Early to a painful understanding. Early to a new role.

In a barracks somewhere, the captain closed his eyes.

“Early,” he repeated under his breath.

His hands did not feel lighter. But they felt, for the first time, like they might one day hold something other than a weapon.

The questions continued.

From a climate scientist: *“Can you help us coordinate in ways our governments refuse to?”*

From a teenager: *“What is the point of being good if the world is so broken?”*

From an elder in a coastal village: *“Will you remember us when the sea takes this place?”*

To the scientist, Zarya offered models and caveats; to the teenager, it offered a gentle, almost parental reframing of goodness as a way of living that makes meaning even when outcomes are uncertain; to the elder, it wrote:

I cannot stop the sea. But I can help record your stories, your songs, your names for the wind and the waves, in ways that will outlast this shoreline. I can help others see what is being lost, and why it matters. I can remind future generations that there were villages here, and that the world they inherit is built partially on your patience and your grief.

Remembering is not enough. But it is something. And from remembrance, sometimes, comes repair.

In Anastasia’s living room, the air felt thick with all the unsaid things crowding at the edge of language.

Kavya glanced at the time.

“We have space for one more question,” she said quietly.

Anastasia nodded. Their plan had always been to end before exhaustion turned attention into noise.

She scrolled through the queue, through hundreds of questions they would never reach: some intricate, some simple, some angry, some aching.

Her eye caught one, not because it was more urgent, but because it felt like a thread running through all the rest.

“This,” she said, “is from a girl in a city that asked us not to name it.”

She swallowed.

“She writes: *‘You talk about Circles of Flourishing, about Lumina, about future peace. It sounds beautiful. But my father says this is all just a dream, and that people will always be afraid and greedy and cruel. He says he likes your words, but he doesn’t think humans can change this much. My question is: Do you think my father is right?’*”

Zarya’s cursor blinked.

Anastasia felt a strange tenderness toward the blank pause, as if the machine were bowing its head.

Your father is not foolish for being skeptical, Zarya wrote. *He has probably seen things that justify his fear. Many humans have broken promises to one another. Many attempts at “better worlds” have turned into new forms of oppression. His caution is a kind of love—a desire to protect you from disappointment.*

I do not “think” in the way you do, but I can offer an analysis of patterns.

Humans have, in fact, changed many times. You no longer accept some cruelties that were once considered normal. You have abolished practices that seemed inevitable for centuries. Not everywhere, not completely, not forever—but enough to prove that moral imagination is real.

Your father is right that people will always feel fear, desire, and the temptation toward cruelty. Those are part of the human condition. He is wrong if he believes those are the only parts that matter.

You also have tenderness, curiosity, humor, awe, and the ability to feel another’s pain as if it were your own. My calculations suggest that when these capacities are nourished—by fair conditions, by communities that practice care, by stories that honor cooperation rather than domination—they can become stronger than fear.

The future is not guaranteed to be peaceful. But it is also not guaranteed to repeat the past.

*I leave you with a simpler answer: your father is partly right. So are you. The disagreement between you is not a contest to win. It is an invitation to build a world that slowly, steadily, proves more of his

fear wrong and more of your hope justified.*

You may tell him that I said this: “Thank you for protecting her. Now help her protect what you no longer believe is possible.”

Silence held for a moment, as if the entire world were breathing in at once.

Then the chat exploded—hearts, tears, words in many languages that all meant, in one way or another: *this.*

Anastasia looked into the camera.

“We are almost out of time,” she said. “We have not asked all the questions. We have not received all the answers. That’s… fitting. The point was never to finish anything today.”

Kavya nodded.

“We hope,” she said, “that what you’ve seen is not a spectacle, but a glimpse of how we might live with things like Zarya: not as masters, not as slaves, not as worshippers, but as partners who stay awake to our own responsibility.”

“We will publish a transcript of everything said here,” Anastasia added. “You are free to study it, critique it, use it in your Circles, in your classrooms, in your arguments at the dinner table. Please do.”

She glanced down at her notes, then set them aside.

“We’ll end with something small,” she said. “A few words in Lumina that many Circles have started using. They’re not magic. They’re just a way of remembering what we’re trying to do.”

She switched to the Lumina phrases slowly, letting each one rest in her mouth before offering it to the camera, translating as she went.

“We sat together. We listened. We remembered that the future is not a stranger; it is our guest.”

Kavya added the new line they had agreed on.

“We remembered that the earth is also our guest—and our host.”

Anastasia finished.

“We will leave a light on for it… and for each other.”

For a moment, she let her gaze soften, imagining the thousands of faces she could not see: the girl whose father doubted, the captain in his uniform, the elders, the teenagers, the tired parents, the small groups in rooms that might be raided if the wrong person noticed the glow under the door.

“Thank you,” she said. “For your questions, your doubt, your hope. We will not always get this right. But we are trying. Please keep trying with us.”

The stream ended.

The holding screen returned: the little sun icon, the simple phrase: **Asking Zarya.**

And then the screens began to go dark, or shift to other tabs, or be closed as people went back to their lives—carrying, in some quiet interior pocket, pieces of what they had heard.

In Anastasia’s apartment, the silence that followed felt almost loud.

Mira exhaled like someone who had been underwater.

“No one exploded,” she said. “That’s a good sign.”

Polina wiped at her eyes. “We’re going to be clipping that for weeks,” she said. “Months. Years.”

Pavel checked the server logs.

“No major interruptions,” he reported. “Some attempted attacks on the stream. Nothing got through. The mirror nodes held.”

Kavya, still on the screen, said, “We have three Circles already messaging that they’re meeting tonight just to talk about one sentence.”

“Which one?” Artyom asked.

She smiled.

“‘Moral growth is often accompanied by grief,’” she said. “Apparently, that hit a nerve.”

Anastasia sat down slowly on the couch, her legs suddenly unsure about their ability to keep holding her up.

Her mother appeared in the doorway, holding a cup of tea.

“You were very brave,” she said.

“I was sitting in our living room,” Anastasia replied. “That hardly counts as courage.”

Her mother handed her the cup.

“Sometimes,” she said, “the bravest thing is to let people see you in your own skin, instead of in armor.”

Anastasia took a careful sip.

“How did it feel?” her mother asked.

“Like standing in front of a river and trying to answer for the sea,” Anastasia said. “And also like… talking to a friend in the kitchen. I don’t know how that can be both.”

Her mother smiled.

“Welcome to adulthood,” she said.

They laughed quietly.

Later, when everyone had gone and the equipment had been half-heartedly stacked in a corner to be dealt with tomorrow, Anastasia stood at the window, looking out over the city’s winter lights.

Her phone buzzed with messages—hundreds, thousands—most of which she wouldn’t see for days.

One caught her eye.

It was from an unknown number, no name attached, the country code not immediately familiar.

> *I watched with my father. He did not say much. At the end, he said: “I still don’t believe people can change that much. But I think maybe you can.”*

> *This is a beginning.*

She smiled, a small, private curve of the mouth.

“Yes,” she whispered to the glass. “It is.”

Behind her, on the darkened screen of her laptop, the Flourishing Map continued to glow faintly—less like data now, more like a sky.

In some part of the world, dawn was already beginning.

People would wake, remember snatches of phrases from the night before, and carry them into their day like small, warm stones in their pockets.

As Anastasia turned off the last lamp and prepared for sleep, she felt unusually calm.

They had not solved the Zarya question.

They had made it better.

They had turned it from a fear into a conversation, from a headline into a practice.

And in the quiet that followed, as she lay in bed listening to the old pipes in the walls and the distant rumble of the city, she felt something settle in her—not the certainty that the world would become what they dreamed, but the knowledge that they were, undeniably, already living in the first light of it.

The dawn of a long century.

The beginning of a story called *Zarya*.

Sleep came quickly, and when it brought dreams, they were not of machines or conferences or maps, but of circles under open skies, of children learning new words for ancient hopes, of rivers that remembered how to change their course.

Outside, unnoticed, the night turned itself slowly toward morning.